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Local chef Riggs top gun at seafood cookoff

BGTC instructor advances to compete in national event

By JUSTIN STORY, The Daily News, jstory@bgdailynews.com/783-3256
Monday, June 23, 2008 11:57 AM CDT

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Michael Riggs has a fish tale in his repertoire of stories, but it isn't about the one that got away.

Riggs, executive chef and head of the culinary arts program at Bowling Green Technical College, won the third annual Great Kentucky Seafood Cookoff earlier this month at Jefferson Community and Technical College in Louisville.

With his victory in the state competition, Riggs will prepare for the Great American Seafood Cookoff, which will be Aug. 2-3 in New Orleans.

Riggs' winning dish was a blackened tilapia topped with blackened freshwater prawn, paddlefish caviar and chives. The skillet-fried tilapia was served on a bed of sliced tomatoes with side items of roasted red bell peppers and black beans with southern cheese grits.

Riggs also grilled corn on the cob, cutting that into the black beans and bell peppers and mixing that with cilantro.

"I wanted to take country food and give it a little bit of flair," Riggs said.

The 20 chefs in the statewide cookoff were asked to prepare a restaurant-quality seafood dish within one hour for a panel of judges.

The meal was prepared using Kentucky-grown seafood products and each dish was judged on taste, execution of skills and ease of preparation using home-grown products.

Riggs said the meals prepared at the competition were intended to be of high enough quality to be served in restaurants, but also simple enough to be prepared at home.

After Riggs submitted his contest application to the Kentucky Department of Agriculture, he was contacted by a department representative, who asked him to submit three seafood recipes.

Riggs would have to prepare one of the three recipes selected by the judges.

"I practiced each recipe once I submitted them and made sure I had my timing down for all of them," said Riggs, adding that the tilapia recipe he ended up preparing was his preferred choice all along. "The day of the contest was a very fast-paced day."

Seafood would not likely be the first response people would give when asked to name Kentucky's claim to fame when it comes to cuisine or farming.

The state agriculture department is promoting seafood farming, otherwise known as



Hunter Wilson/Daily News

Mike Riggs holds the first-place plaque Friday that he won in the Great Kentucky Seafood Cookoff in Louisville. He teaches at Bowling Green Technical College.

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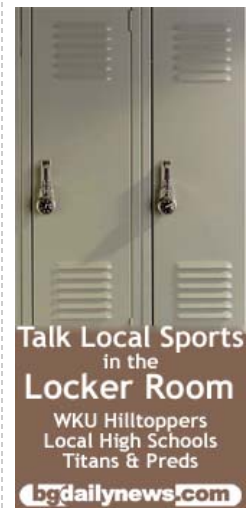
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aquaculture, within the state.

Bill Clary, a spokesman for the agriculture department, classified aquaculture as a "growing niche" among farmers in Kentucky, with farmers in the far western part of the state raising tilapia and catfish and some farmers in central Kentucky raising shrimp in man-made ponds.

"If people are intelligent about (aquaculture) and have a good business sense, then it becomes a good way to make a little bit of a living," Clary said.

Much of the seafood raised in Kentucky is shipped to restaurants and the retail market.

Clary did not know how much revenue aquaculture generated, though he said that when the agriculture department began promoting seafood a few years ago, it was projected as an industry that could possibly raise \$2 million a year.

"Things like shrimp and specialty crops are sometimes sold pondside by the farmers themselves, much like you sometimes see vegetables being sold roadside," Clary said.

With more than a month of lead time before the national competition in New Orleans, Riggs has plenty of time to prepare, and he is hopeful that he will be able to make his tilapia dish again.

Riggs said the national seafood cookoff will have a format similar to "Iron Chef," with the competing chefs preparing a meal using a main ingredient selected in advance by the judges.

"I went to New Orleans about five years before Hurricane Katrina, so I'm looking forward to going back and seeing how the city has been recovering," Riggs said.

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